

# Springtime for Trotsky

## Review

[Ralph Raico](#)

*Leon Trotsky*. By Irving Howe. Viking Press, 1978, 214 pages.

Leon Trotsky has always had a certain appeal for intellectuals that the other Bolshevik leaders lacked. The reasons for this are clear enough. He was a writer, an occasional literary critic — according to Irving Howe, a very good one — and an historian (of the revolutions of 1905 and 1917). He had an interest in psychoanalysis and modern developments in physics, and, even when in power, suggested that the new Communist thought-controllers shouldn't be too harsh on writers with such ideas — not exactly a Nat Hentoff position on freedom of expression, but about as good as one can expect among Communists.

Above all, Trotsky was himself an intellectual, and one who played a great part in what many of that breed have considered to be the *real world* — the world of revolutionary bloodshed and terror. He was second only to Lenin in 1917; in the Civil War he was the leader of the Red Army and the Organizer of Victory. As Howe says, "For intellectuals throughout the world there was something fascinating about the spectacle of a man of words transforming himself through sheer will into a man of deeds."

Trotsky lost out to Stalin in the power struggle of the 1920s, and in exile became a severe and knowledgeable critic of his great antagonist; thus, for intellectuals with no access to other critics of Stalinism — classical liberal, anarchist, or conservative — Trotsky's writings in the 1930s opened their eyes to some aspects at least of the charnel-house that was Stalin's Russia. During the period of the Great Purge and the Moscow show trials, Trotsky was placed at the center of the myth of treason and collaboration with Germany and Japan that Stalin spun as a pretext for eliminating his old comrades. In 1940, an agent of the Soviet secret police, Ramon Mercador, sought Trotsky out at his home in Mexico City and killed him with an ice ax to the head.



*Mugshot of Trotsky after Soviet members were arrested during a meeting in Free Economic Society building. Photo taken 3 December 1905. Saint Petersburg police department. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.*

Irving Howe, the distinguished literary critic and editor of *Dissent*, tells the story of this interesting life with great lucidity, economy, and grace. The emphasis is on Trotsky's thought, with which Howe has concerned himself for almost the past 40 years. As a young man, he states, "I came for a brief time under Trotsky's influence, and since then, even though or perhaps because I have remained a socialist, I have found myself moving farther and farther away from his ideas."

Howe is in fact considerably more critical of Trotsky than I had expected. He identifies many of Trotsky's crucial errors, and uses them to cast light on the flaws in Marxism, Leninism, and the Soviet regime that Trotsky contributed so much to creating. And yet there is a curious ambivalence in the book. Somehow the ignorance and evil in Trotsky's life are never allowed their full weight in the balance, and, in the end, he turns out to be, in Howe's view, a hero and "titan" of the 20th century. It's as if Howe had chosen not to think out fully the moral implications of what it means to have said and done the things that Trotsky said and did.

We can take as our first example Howe's discussion of the final outcome of Trotsky's political labors: the Bolshevik revolution and the Soviet regime. Throughout this book Howe makes cogent points regarding the real class character of this regime and other Communist governments — which, he notes, manifested itself very early on:

*A new social stratum — it had sprung up the very morning of the revolution — began to consolidate itself: the party-state bureaucracy which found its support in the technical intelligentsia, the factory managers, the military officials, and, above all, the party functionaries.... To speak of a party-state bureaucracy in a country where industry has been nationalized means to speak of a new ruling elite, perhaps a new ruling class, which parasitically fastened itself upon every institution of Russian life. [emphasis in original]*

Howe goes on to say that it was not to be expected that the Bolsheviks themselves would realize what they had done and what class they had actually raised to power: "It was a historical novelty for which little provision had been made in the Marxist scheme of things, except perhaps in some occasional passages to be found in Marx's writings about the distinctive social character of Oriental despotism."

This is not entirely correct. Howe himself shows how Trotsky, in his book *1905* (a history of the Russian revolution of that year), had had a glimpse of this form of society, one in which the state bureaucracy was itself the ruling class. In analyzing the Tsarist regime, Trotsky had picked up on the strand of Marxist thought that saw the state as an *independent parasitic body*, feeding on all the social classes engaged in the process of production. This was a view that Marx expressed, for instance, in his *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

More importantly, the class character of Marxism itself — as well as the probable consequences of the coming to power of a Marxist Party — had been identified well before Trotsky's time. The great 19th-century anarchist Michael Bakunin — whose name does not even appear in Howe's book, just as not a single other anarchist is even mentioned anywhere in it — had already subjected Marxism to critical

scrutiny in the 1870s. In the course of this, Bakunin had uncovered the dirty little secret of the future Marxist state:

*The State has always been the patrimony of some privileged class or other; a priestly class, an aristocratic class, a bourgeois class, and finally a bureaucratic class.... But in the People's State of Marx, there will be, we are told, no privileged class at all ... but there will be a government, which will not content itself with governing and administering the masses politically, as all governments do today, but which will also administer them economically, concentrating in its own hands the production and the just division of wealth, the cultivation of land, the establishment and development of factories, the organization and direction of commerce, finally the application of capital to production by the only banker, the State. All that will demand an immense knowledge and many "heads overflowing with brains" in this government. It will be the reign of scientific intelligence, the most aristocratic, despotic, arrogant, and contemptuous of all regimes. There will be a new class, a new hierarchy of real and pretended scientists and scholars. [Emphasis added.]*

This perspective was taken up somewhat later by the Polish-Russian revolutionist, Wacław Machajski, who held, in the words of Max Nomad, that — "nineteenth century socialism was not the expression of the interests of the manual workers but the ideology of the impecunious, malcontent, lower middle-class intellectual workers ... behind the socialist 'ideal' was a new form of exploitation for the benefit of the officeholders and managers of the socialized state."

Thus, that Marxism in power would mean the rule of state functionaries was not merely intrinsically probable — given the massive increment of state power envisaged by Marxists, what else *could* it be? — but it had also been *predicted* by writers well known to a revolutionary like Trotsky. Trotsky, however, had not permitted himself to take this analysis seriously before committing himself to the Marxist revolutionary enterprise. More than that: "To the end of his days," as Howe writes, he "held that Stalinist Russia should still be designated as a 'degenerated workers' state' because it preserved the nationalized property forms that were a 'conquest' of the Russian Revolution" — as if nationalized property and the planned economy were not the *very instruments of rule* of the new class in Soviet Russia!

It remained for some of Trotsky's more critical disciples, especially Max Shachtman in the United States, to point out to their master what had actually happened in Russia: that the Revolution had not produced a "workers' State," nor was there any danger that "capitalism" would be restored, as Trotsky continued to fret it would. Instead, there had come into an existence in Russia a "bureaucratic collectivism" even more reactionary and oppressive than what had gone before.

Trotsky rejected this interpretation. In fact he had no choice. For, as Howe states, the dissidents "called into question the entire revolutionary perspective upon which [Trotsky] continued to base his politics.... There was the further possibility, if Trotsky's critics were right, that the whole perspective of socialism might have to be revised." Indeed.

To his credit, Howe recognizes that a key period for understanding Bolshevism, including the thought of Trotsky, is the period of war communism, from 1918 to 1921. As he describes it, "Industry was almost completely nationalized. Private trade was banned. Party squads were sent into the countryside to requisition food from the peasants." The results were tragic on a vast scale. The economic system simply broke down, with all the immense suffering and all the countless deaths from starvation that such a

small statement implies. As Trotsky himself later put it, "The collapse of the productive forces surpassed anything of the kind that history had ever seen. The country, and the government with it, were at the very edge of the abyss."

How had this come about? Here Howe follows the orthodox interpretation: War communism was merely the product of emergency conditions, created by the Revolution and the Civil War. It was a system of "extreme measures [which the Bolsheviks] had never dreamt of in their earlier programs."

Now, this last may be, strictly speaking, correct. It may well be, that is, that the Bolsheviks had never had the slightest idea of what their aims would mean *concretely* for the economic life of Russia, how those aims would of necessity have to be implemented, or what the consequences would be.

But war communism was no mere "improvisation," whose horrors are to be chalked up to the chaos in Russia at the time. The system was *willed* and itself helped produce that chaos. As Paul Craig Roberts has argued in his brilliant book *Alienation and the Soviet Economy*, war communism was an attempt to translate into "Reality" the Marxist ideal: the abolition of "commodity production," of the price system and the market.

This, as Roberts demonstrates, was what Marxism was *all about*. This is what the end of "alienation" and the final liberation of mankind *consisted* in. Why should it be surprising that when self-confident and determined Marxists like Lenin and Trotsky seized power in a great nation, they tried to put into effect the *very policy* that was their whole reason for being?

As evidence for this interpretation, Roberts quotes Trotsky himself (ironically, from a book of Trotsky's writings edited by Irving Howe):

*[T]he period of so-called "war communism" [was a period when] economic life was wholly subjected to the needs of the front ... it is necessary to acknowledge, however, that in its original conception it pursued broader aims. The Soviet government hoped and strove to develop these methods of regimentation directly into a system of planned economy in distribution as well as production. In other words, from "war communism" it hoped gradually, but without destroying the system, to arrive at genuine communism ... reality, however, came into increasing conflict with the program of "war communism." Production continually declined, and not only because of the destructive action of the war.*

Roberts goes on to quote Victor Serge: "The social system of those years was later called 'War Communism.' At the time it was called simply 'Communism' ... Trotsky had just written that this system would last over decades if the transition to a genuine, unfettered Socialism was to be assured. Bukharin ... considered the present mode of production to be final."

One slight obstacle was encountered, however, on the road to the abolition of the price system and the market: "Reality," as Trotsky noted, "came into increasing conflict" with the economic "system" that the Bolshevik rulers had fastened on Russia. After a few years of misery and famine for the Russian masses — there is no record of any Bolshevik leader having died of starvation in this period — the rulers thought again, and a New Economic Policy (NEP) — including elements of private ownership and allowing for market transactions — was decreed.

The significance of all this cannot be exaggerated. What we have with Trotsky and his comrades in the Great October Revolution is the spectacle of a few literary-philosophical intellectuals seizing power in a

great country with the aim of overturning the whole economic system — *but without the slightest idea of how an economic system works*. In *State and Revolution*, written just before he took power, Lenin wrote,

*The accounting and control necessary [for the operation of a national economy] have been simplified by capitalism to the utmost, till they have become the extraordinarily simple operations of watching, recording and issuing receipts, within the reach of anybody who can read and write and knows the first four rules of arithmetic.*

With this piece of cretinism Trotsky doubtless agreed. And why wouldn't he? Lenin, Trotsky, and the rest had all their lives been professional revolutionaries, with no connection at all to the process of production and, except for Bukharin, little interest in the real workings of an economic system. Their concerns had been the strategy and tactics of revolution and the perpetual, monkish exegesis of the holy books of Marxism.

The nitty-gritty of how an economic system *functions* — how, in our world, men and women work, produce, exchange, and *survive*— was something from which they prudishly averted their eyes, as pertaining to the nether-regions. These "materialists" and "scientific socialists" lived in a mental world where understanding Hegel, Feuerbach, and the hideousness of Eugen Duehring's philosophical errors was infinitely more important than understanding what might be the meaning of a price.

Of the actual operations of social production and exchange they had about the same appreciation as John Henry Newman or, indeed, St. Bernard of Clairvaux. This is a common enough circumstance among intellectuals; the tragedy here is that the Bolsheviks came to rule over millions of real workers, real peasants, and real businessmen.

Howe puts the matter rather too sweetly: once in power, he says, "Trotsky was trying to think his way through difficulties no Russian Marxist had quite foreseen." And what did the brilliant intellectual propose as a solution to the problems Russia now faced? "In December 1919 Trotsky put forward a series of 'theses' [sic] before the party's Central Committee in which he argued for compulsory work and labor armies ruled through military discipline...."

So, forced labor, and not just for political opponents, but for the *Russian working class*. Let Daniel and Gabriel Cohn-Bendit, the left-anarchists from the May days of 1968 in Paris, take up the argument:

*"Was it so true," Trotsky asked, "that compulsory labor was always unproductive?" He denounced this view as "wretched and miserable liberal prejudice," learnedly pointing out that "chattel slavery, too, was productive" and that compulsory serf labor was in its times "a progressive phenomenon." He told the unions [at the Third Congress of Trade Unions] that "coercion, regimentation, and militarization of labor were no mere emergency measures and that the workers' State normally had the right to coerce any citizen to perform any work at any place of its choosing."*

And why not? Hadn't Marx and Engels, in their ten-point program for revolutionary government in *The Communist Manifesto*, demanded as Point Eight, "Equal liability for all to labor. Establishment of industrial armies, especially for agriculture"? Neither Marx nor Engels ever disavowed their claim that those in charge of "the workers' state" had the right to enslave the workers and peasants whenever the need might arise. Now, having annihilated the hated market, the Bolsheviks found that the need for

enslavement had, indeed, arisen. And of all the Bolshevik leaders, the most ardent and aggressive advocate of forced labor was Leon Trotsky.

There are other areas in which Howe's critique of Trotsky is not penetrating enough, in which it turns out to be altogether too soft-focused and oblique. For instance, he taxes Trotsky with certain philosophical contradictions stemming from his belief in "historical materialism." All through his life, Howe asserts, Trotsky employed "moral criteria by no means simply derived from or reducible to class interest. He would speak of honor, courage, and truth as if these were known constants, for somewhere in the orthodox Marxist there survived a streak of nineteenth century Russian ethicism, earnest and romantic."

Let us leave aside the silly implication that there is something "romantic" about belief in ethical values, as against the "scientific" character of orthodox Marxism. In this passage, Howe seems to be saying that adherence to certain commonly accepted values is, among Marxists, a rare kind of atavism on Trotsky's part. Not at all.

*Of course* historical materialism dismisses ethical rules as nothing more than the "expression," or "reflection," or whatever, of "underlying class relationships" and, ultimately, of "the material productive forces." But no Marxist has ever taken this seriously, except as pretext for *breaking* ethical rules (as when Lenin and Trotsky argued in justification of their terror). Even Marx and Engels, in their "Inaugural Address of the First International," wrote that the International's foreign policy would be to "vindicate the simple laws of morals and justice [sic] which ought to govern the relations of private individuals, as the laws paramount of the intercourse of nations."

That Trotsky admired honor, courage, and truth is not something that cries out for explanation by reference to Russian tradition of "ethicism" (whatever that might be). The admiration of those values is a part of the common heritage of us all. To think that there is a problem here that needs explaining is to take "historical materialism" much too seriously to begin with.

Similarly with other contradictions Howe thinks he has discovered between Trotsky's Marxist philosophy and certain statements Trotsky made in commenting on real political events. Of the Bolshevik Revolution itself, Trotsky says that it would have taken place even if he had not been in Petrograd, "on condition that Lenin was present and in command." Howe asks, "What happens to historical materialism?" The point Howe is making, of course, is that in the Marxist view individuals are not allowed to play any critical role in shaping really important historical events, let alone in determining whether or not they occur.

But the answer to Howe's question is that, when Trotsky commits a blunder like this, *nothing* happens. Nothing happens, because "historical materialism" was pretentious nonsense from the beginning, a political strategy rather than a philosophical position. Occasionally, in daubing in some of the light patches of sky that are intended to make up for the dark ones in Trotsky's life, Howe comes perilously close to slipping into a fantasy world.

He says that in the struggle with Stalin, Trotsky was at a disadvantage, because he "fought on the terrain of the enemy, accepting the damaging assumption of a Bolshevik monopoly of power." But why is this assumption located on the enemy's terrain? Trotsky shared that view with Stalin. He no more believed that a supporter of capitalism had a right to propagate his ideas than a medieval inquisitor believed in a

witch's personal life style. And as for the rights even of other socialists — Trotsky in 1921 had led the attack on the Kronstadt rebels, who merely demanded freedom for socialists other than the Bolsheviks. At the time, Trotsky boasted that the rebels would be shot "like partridges" — as, pursuant to his orders, they were.

Howe even stoops to trying a touch of pathos. In sketching the tactics Stalin used in the struggle with Trotsky, he speaks of "the organized harassment to which Trotskyist leaders, distinguished Old Bolsheviks, were subjected by hooligans in the employ of the party apparatus, the severe threats made against all within the party...." Really now — is it political violence used against *Leon Trotsky* and his "distinguished" followers that is supposed to make our blood run cold? No: if there was ever a satisfying case of poetic justice, the "harassment" and "persecution" of Trotsky — down to and including the ice-ax incident — is surely it.

The best example of Howe's strange gentleness toward Trotsky I have saved for the last. What, when all is said and done, was Trotsky's picture of the Communist society of the future? Howe does quote from Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution* the famous, and ridiculous, last lines: "The average human type [Trotsky wrote] will rise to the heights of an Aristotle, a Goethe, or a Marx. And above this ridge new peaks will rise." He doesn't, however, tell us what precedes these lines — Trotsky's sketch of the future society, his passionate dream. Under Communism, Trotsky states, Man will

*reconstruct society and himself in accordance with his own plan.... The imperceptible, ant-like piling up of quarters and streets, brick by brick, from generation to generation, will give way to the titanic construction of city-villages, with map and compass in hand.... Communist life will not be formed blindly, like coral islands, but will be built up consciously, will be erected and corrected.... Even purely physiologic life will become subject to collective experiments. The human species, the coagulated Homo sapiens, will once more enter into a state of radical transformation, and, in his own hands, will become an object of the most complicated methods of artificial selection and psycho-physical training.... [It will be] possible to reconstruct fundamentally the traditional family life.... The human race will not have ceased to crawl on all fours before God, kings and capital, in order later to submit humbly before the laws of heredity and sexual selection! ... Man will make it his purpose ... to create a higher social biological type, or, if you please, a superman.*

"Man ... his own plan ... his purpose... his own hands." When Trotsky promoted the formation of worker-slave armies in industry, he believed that his own will was the will of the Proletarian Man. It is easy to guess whose will would stand in for that of Communist Man when the time came to direct the collective experiments on the physiological life, the complicated methods of artificial selection and psycho-physiological training, the reconstruction of the traditional family, the substitution of "something else" for blind sexual selection in the reproduction of human beings, and the creation of the superhuman.

This, then, is Trotsky's final goal: a world where mankind is "free" in the sense that Marxism understands the term — where all of human life, starting from the economic, but going on to embrace everything, even the most private and intimate parts of human existence — is consciously *planned* by "society," which is assumed to have a single will. And it is this — this disgusting positivist nightmare — that, for him, made all the enslavement and killings *acceptable*!

Surely, this was another dirty little secret that Howe had an obligation to let us in on.

Howe ends by saying of Trotsky that "the example of his energy and heroism is likely to grip the imagination of generations to come," adding that, "even those of us who cannot heed his word may recognize that Leon Trotsky, in his power and his fall, is one of the titans of our century."

This is the kind of writing that covers the great issues of right and wrong in human affairs with a blanket of historicist snow. The fact is that Trotsky used his talents to take power in order to impose his willful dream — the abolition of the market, private property, and the bourgeoisie. His actions brought untold misery and death to his country.

Yet, to the end of his life, he tried in every way he could to bring the Marxist revolution to other peoples — to the French, the Germans, the Italians — with what probable consequences, he, better than anyone else, had reason to know. He was a champion of thought-control, prison camps, and the firing squad for his opponents, and of forced labor for ordinary, nonbrilliant working people. He openly defended chattel slavery — which, even in our century, must surely put him into a quite select company.

He was an intellectual who never asked himself such a simple question as: "What reason do I have to believe that the economic condition of workers under socialism will be better than under capitalism?" To the last, he never permitted himself to glimpse the possibility that the bloody, bureaucratic tyranny over which Stalin presided might never have come into existence but for his own efforts.

A hero? Well, no thank you — I'll find my own heroes somewhere else. A titan of the 20th century? In a sense, yes. At least Leon Trotsky shares with the other "titans" of our century this characteristic: it would have been better if he had never been born.

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